16: Collart et al - G-5 (1953) 1954 MD1 Syria MD1

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ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOWN

The Citadel of Aleppo, with its deep moat, and steep and grandiose glacis held in place by stone columns, etches a lacy crown around the hill formed by the accumulated ruins of older civilizations, and is truly symbolic of the city which, throughout its long history, has weathered events that brought ruin and death everywhere around it. At its foot spreads out the serried network of thoroughfares converging from desert and sea, turned, as it were, to stone in the rational yet florid architecture of the town.

Aleppo has always been considered the key city of communication and trade. From time to time wars have halted its development, but its own peculiar logic, unity and coherence have continued, despite changes in political circumstance. In Seleucid times and later in the Roman and Byzantine period, its contacts and influence grew steadily; it then became the real metropolis of northern Syria. Antioch remained the great centre of culture; Aleppo was the city of trade, industry and manufacturing.

In the art of building too, Aleppo was always the leader, suffering no declines or lapses, able to combine the rational and geometric logic of Greek construction with the monumental design of Rome and the plastic and decorative fantasy of the Mesopotamian Orient. In contrast with the poor building materials of Mesopotamia—where sun-dried brick and mud were used—Aleppo had its rich resources of limestone, which it used generously, as though in passionate pursuit of an ideal to create forms and motifs suited to the requirements of architecture. It achieved a relationship between the structure of its buildings and the nature and characteristics of the stone, which was a factor in the artistic conception as a whole, just as water was in Damascus, where pools, streams and tinkling fountains lent life and movement to courts and spaces.

It is difficult, in a few words, to describe the various buildings and classify them according to their type and style. J. Sauvaget has made a detailed study of the question in connexion with the town's historical development, and has drawn

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up a list. However, his work has not exhausted all that there is to be said about the character of a city in which works of art and buildings still play a lively part and where every new study, every town planning or restoration scheme, reveals something new. 341

Old buildings have often been adapted to serve a new purpose; more often still, the fabric and decoration of buildings no longer serving their original purpose, have been used for new ones. For example, the Great Mosque, which, as it now appears, belongs to the Mameluke period, preserves, hidden within its structure, many parts dating from earlier times, while the beautiful minaret (A.D. 1090), which, for its shape and decoration, is of the greatest interest in the study of Moslem architecture in Syria, still stands for all to see. The highly original vaulted arches at "Sheikh Mohassin" rest on ancient capitals. The oldest madrasah in Aleppo was originally a church and the old cathedral has been transformed into a Moslem college. The mosque of the Mulberry Tree has a Greek entablature. The Citadel rests on Byzantine buildings, having made use of a few of their rooms and the huge water tank. Even the ramparts, in the size and bonding of their stones, show the influence of various periods, from the Greco-Roman, to which the lower masonry belongs, to the Mameluke, when almost all its magnificent towers were rebuilt.

Motifs, design and methods, and, above all, architectural atmosphere, were retained with the materials, as new themes were worked out to suit new political or religious circumstances or wider trade relations. Whilst the Citadel, ramparts, madrasahs and Sufi convents represent the frontier city in its struggles with the Crusaders and Shiism, the growth of the suburbs and the suqs bears witness to the commercial importance of the town which, after the destruction of Antioch, resumed its traditional role as a centre of trade with Persia and India.

From the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, Aleppo was a flourishing city. Beautiful private houses and monumental khans, combining with the suqs, fountains and mosques to form an intricate architectural pattern, reflect its life during that period. The taste for baroque decoration, copied from Italy, France and Spain, finds expression in the framework of

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341 doorways and windows and in the rich ornamentation of the ceilings, whilst motifs drawn from Constantinople are preferred in the El-Adliyeh, Khosrawiya, Othmaniya and Ahmediye mosques and madrassahs and in the high minarets with their tapering cone-shaped tops.

This coherent complex of buildings, with its continuous life, enables us to follow the whole course of development in technique and taste, religious ideas and history, and commercial organization. Together with the buildings of Cairo, it provides an essential basis for any study of Moslem architecture.

PRESENTATION OF MONUMENTS

172 The preservation of monuments involves striking a balance between a number of considerations—their purpose, the need to restore them to their original appearance, the practical and commercial ends they serve and the requirements of town planning and modern life. All this raises questions of such complexity as to suggest that, in a town like Aleppo, it would be wise to set up a commission of experts to advise the authorities. Such a commission should include scholars, artists, and representatives of the various bodies concerned, and its task would be to examine the most suitable means of giving the city's architectural treasures a place in its modern life, bringing out their character more clearly and making the most of their beauties.

There is a whole series of monuments which no longer serve any practical end and are accordingly beginning to be counted as archaeological relics. In many cases, the maintenance and restoration they require makes them a heavy financial drain, while their value as a source of income is nil. Nevertheless they ought to be preserved and safeguarded in view of the national, cultural and spiritual values for which they stand. They cannot be classed as things now useless and abandoned to people too poor to pay for modern housing accommodation, or put to some low-yield industrial use. To adopt such criteria would mean renouncing outright all possibility of leaving, in the history of the city and the nation, any permanent memorial of what has been.

Officialdom does not always grasp these requirements; under the constraint of an annual balance sheet it takes the view that the artistic heritage is too rich already, and its preservation and maintenance too difficult and costly. But a monument is like a tree: it has a positive value even if it yields no fruit and if its immediate usefulness is not obvious. When the tree has been reduced to firewood, or the stones of the monument quarried, and its site used for new buildings, then we realize that it was not only a thing of beauty in itself but an irreplaceable element in our daily lives.

Today as in the past—perhaps even more than in the past—local authorities are at great pains, in development works, to enhance a town's beauties. In our view, the best way of effecting this is to take into account the aesthetic possibilities of ancient architecture. On this point we can but repeat what has already been said, in connexion with Damascus, about the beauty of the old quarters, and the narrow peaceful alleys, about the practical and aesthetic significance of the suqs and khans, about the value of the picturesque in the urban scene and hence the desirability of preserving the atmosphere and integrity of a setting which is the slow growth of centuries.

Aleppo in particular has outstanding possibilities for pro-

361 the main centre of the Jebel Zawiyé, was both an agricultural
172 and an industrial town (large-scale production of oil and wine),
and finally covered an area about 2 miles long by 1 ½ wide.
Among the confused heaps of its ruins, the remains of several
churches and rich mausolea of the sixth century, with their
pyramidal crowns, are recognizable.

172 G. Tchalenko has drawn attention to the similarity of the
341 architecture throughout the limestone plateau due to the use
of the same materials and the same methods of hewing and
bonding stone. He has also noted the unity and homogeneity
of the carved ornamentation, which was gradually adapted to
the new forms of the various buildings. This suggests that
itinerant groups of craftsmen went from place to place, taking
their style and methods with them.

172 Evidence is provided by [illegible] buildings, varying in
346 nature and importance. We would draw particular attention
to two of them, which seem to surpass all the others by their
quality and exceptional charm. The first is the cruciform
basilica of St. Simeon (Qalaat Semaan) built in the third quarter
of the fifth century around the column on which the Stylite
spent the last 37 years of his life and which, long after his death,
was still a famous place of pilgrimage. The originality of
the plan, the masterly structure of the central octagon, with
its great semi-circular arches, the harmonious proportions of
the chevet and the southern façade, together with the neigh-
bouring baptistery and conventual buildings, make this peerless
architectural group "the greatest and grandest Christian ruin
in the East". The second of these monuments, lesser known
because it is difficult of access, is the basilica of Qalbloze,
standing in a temenos, like an ancient temple, on the crest
of the Jebel el-Ala. It dates from the end of the fifth century.
Its façade flanked by towers, its chevet adorned with columns,
the great arches separating the nave from the side aisles, the
majestic proportions of the apse, and the quality and sober
arrangement of carving, produce that impression of harmony
and perfection that only a masterpiece can achieve.

THE POPULATION OF THE LIMESTONE PLATEAU

361 The profusion of ruins over such a large area, not only in the
172 vicinity of fertile plains, but on rocky and waterless plateaux
shows that there was once a large population, which later disap-
peared completely. The construction of water tanks may
have helped the people to subsist, but that alone cannot explain
their extraordinary prosperity. What, then, were their means
of livelihood?

Some have thought the answer to this question to be that
the arable land disappeared as a result of complete and unchecked
deforestation, which brought about a radical change in the
conditions of life. Tchalenko does not agree; in the work
already referred to, he gives a simpler and more plausible
explanation of this phenomenon.

It has long been established that the ancient inhabitants of
the limestone plateau owed their prosperity to the cultivation
of the olive and, to a lesser degree, of the vine. The many
presses found in all the settlements are proof of this. The
cultivation of these crops is perfectly feasible in the soil and
climate of the present day. It was a change in political and
social circumstances which brought about the decline in the
population. Where the soil accumulated in rocky basins and